



HALUK AKAKÇE: *Illusion of the First Time*

October 28, 2002–January 10, 2003

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris

The Time Is Now

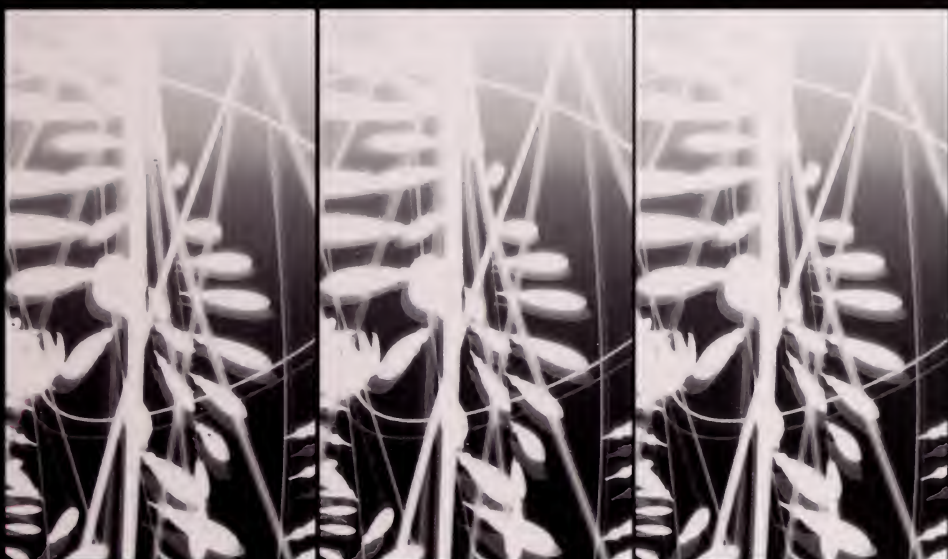
I would like to create a dream to wake up to, a dream that comes out and wanders in darkness—everything else fades away, like a precious light contained in a shadowy void.
—Haluk Akakçe¹

The ancient Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (c. AD 23–79) is said to have described the origin of painting as the moment when a woman, Dibutades, traced onto the wall the shadow of her departing lover, cast there by candlelight. Striving to circumvent the passing of time that takes him away from her, to create a future memory, she is forced to turn away from the sight of the present—her lover—that is the source of this desire. Sketching his outline onto the wall, she creates presence out of absence, image out of darkness. Light becomes the shadow of time, and the darkness—the shadow drawing—is in return the recollection of light.

In *Illusion of the First Time*, a new installation by Turkish-born artist Haluk Akakçe at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, the interplay of light and shadow, motion and stillness, absence and a reborn presence suggests a similar collapsing of the idea of time. Entering the Museum, one is first drawn to the play of thick, black lines etched, it seems, directly onto the glass doors that frame the view into gallery. Listing and tilting across the surface, the lines recall the shadows of trees, or a crowd of people moving across a strong light source and casting inky, attenuated shadows. Behind the glass, a black wall is limned with narrow white streaks that echo the black lines. Visible only when the viewer approaches from an angle, the shifting planes of the design flicker and move against one another, graphic and sharp but also in flux with every change of the viewer's trajectory.

In the gallery, the viewer enters an interior room cloaked in a soft blackness. The high ceilings and the tight dimensions of the walls form a space both intimate and reverent, intensifying the silence. On the facing wall, three large projected images merge into a single mural-size frame, cycling through three "compositions" in a symphony of shape and image.² The first is silent, echoing the graphic black lines of the exterior wall but here moving in increasingly hectic motion, rushing past one another almost anxiously in every direction—both across the plane of the wall and seemingly into the depth of the surface itself. The second section evolves slowly from a deep graded darkness into shadowy, slow-moving organic shapes that drift gently down the surface with increasing density, spiraling like loosened strands of a DNA helix and accompanied by an eerie, beautiful score. The third composition is heavy with diffuse, watery color, rich to the eye after the intense gray scale of the previous two. Spinning and unfolding slowly, as if rising through water, indeterminate techno-organic objects float upward through melting greens and pinks. Clearly articulated in three dimensions against the flat stain of the background, the objects cluster at the top of the image as if waiting, patiently, optimistically, to bloom beyond the surface's edge.

Illusion of the First Time draws on the increasingly abstract vocabulary of forms that characterizes Akakçe's recent work. Elaborating on earlier installations that combined wall paintings with projection, here Akakçe seeks to fuse the process further—the wall becomes the surface of the painting and the projection its medium. Evoking the myth of painting's origin, Akakçe captures a drawing of light in space that is as unfixed and fluid as a shadow. He plays with the characteristics of the media at his disposal to undermine their indeterminacy—for example, the formal and compositional aspects of the projections recall abstract painting, while simultaneously creating a dramatic, almost cinematographic denouement. The painterly, gestural flatness of the forms is tempered by the suggestion of a virtual space



with impossible, artificial depth. Each image is narrowly framed by the blackness of the wall, suggesting a traditional notion of painting and object; yet there is no actual object, no literal plane of the artwork distinct from its surface.

The gentle streams of light, soft transparency, and subtle hues of *Illusion of the First Time* offer an ambiguous, dreamlike vision that suggests rather than depicts an organic evolution. The three successive sequences of the projections evolve in a dynamic continuum of form—from the rapid yet seemingly aimless movement of the first, and flattest, forms to the swelling and unfolding upward movement of the volumetric forms of the third segment. Yet there is no distinct conclusion to the narrative, no comfortable resolution to the process as it continually cycles through the three compositions. The hypnotic, almost organic movement and the repetition of shadowy forms brings to mind Plato's famous parable of the cave, in which the reality seen by the cave's inhabitants was eventually discovered to be no more than moving shadows cast on the wall. *Illusion of the First Time* similarly suggests the ultimate instability of the world and the constancy of its flux. Is all reality merely perception, or is there a true essence, a true nature of things and the world? Is there meaning that can be determined, or are we too detached from a definition of real to achieve it? For this installation, Akakçe sought to provide a meditative environment in which the viewer can both experience these questions as well as escape from them—an antidote to the often aggressive engagement with the everyday world. As its title suggests, *Illusion of the First Time* may be no more than a specter, a mirage of experience. Yet the attempt to recapture the process of discovery, the miraculous potential of any new and profound moment, is itself inherently optimistic.

"Thrones and dominions," the Finn said obscurely. "Yeah, there's things out there. Ghosts, voices. Why not? Oceans had mermaids...and we had a sea of silicon, see? Sure, it's just a tailored hallucination we all agreed to have, cyberspace, but anybody who jacks in knows...knows it's a whole universe...."

*"For us," Lucas said, "the world has always worked that way."*³

Drawing on earlier investigations of technology, virtuality, time, and transformation, with *Illusion of the First Time* Akakçe exercises a new formal restraint in his work, a more focused dramatics of image and form integrated with the existing space. However, like his previous installations, *Illusion of the First Time* creates a distinct, otherworldly environment for the viewer. The installation captures the heavy solitude that permeates Akakçe's alternate worlds, the sense of being outside of real space that the artist sees as parallel to the "disappearance of coordinates, caused by the fragmentation of social structures" that characterizes contemporary society.⁴

In his first digitally animated video, *The Measure of All Things* (2000), Akakçe used three-dimensional rendering software and live-action segments to evoke a world that addresses the basic human desire for ultimate freedom and the flawed, often counteractive perversity of our attempts to achieve this goal—in this case, the birth of the information age. The video depicts in part a massive structure resembling the DNA double helix, but with genetic information reconfigured as binary-coded spheres; it twists up from the viewer's vantage point in a black void to an indeterminate futuristic cityscape. The



Still from *The Measure of All Things*, 2000. Collection of the artist; courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

video captures the (implicitly failed) utopian notion of cyberspace as an arena of true liberation, in which all identity can be simulated, all space limitless, and all beginnings hopeful. The only human presence is a pregnant woman, symbolizing human creation as the quintessential individual populating the contradictory visions of both idyllic nature and the empty, machine-driven urban landscape.

Like much of Akakçe's work, *The Measure of All Things* captures the yearning for the future as infinite potential and the return of the imagined past of the last promised land. He is deeply invested in examining the increasing integration of the "parallel worlds" of technology conceived by new vehicles of communication, where increased access to information coexists with the growing isolation of human understanding. Using and celebrating these same technologies, Akakçe's work resides in the contradictions of technological potential. "The question is," he notes, "where and how we should draw the line between a reality that desires to be virtual, and a virtuality that imitates reality: Neither have much sympathy for difference."⁵

The title *The Measure of All Things* is derived from the well-known statement of relativism by the ancient Greek sophist Protagoras (480–411 BC): "Man is the measure of all things." In one scene of the video, the words "*natura naturans*" are imprinted on a wall—a phrase meaning "creating nature." During the Renaissance, this phrase came to be equated with God, thus imbuing the act of creation, aesthetic or otherwise, with extraordinary power and responsibility. Taken in concert, these two references suggest that the manmade—or created nature—is the true act of godliness, and that this creation is what determines reality, rather than some objective essence of things. Embodying the most drastic potential for the creation of new worlds in human history, technology takes a godlike seat in contemporary society. Or perhaps the relationship is more reciprocal: might this desire for transcendence of the real in cyberspace require a theology distinct from the world of existing nature (*natura naturata*)? In the ontological space of the future, does the created universe—*natura naturans*—prompt us in return to create organized structures of origin? Does technology now give us the power to generate our own gods?

"You should pretend that we are talking two languages at once. One of them, you already understand...the language of street tech....But, at the same time, with the same words, we are talking about other things...."

"Okay," Bobby said, getting the hang of it, "then what's the matrix? If she's a deck, and Danbala's a program, what's cyberspace?"

"The world," Lucas said.⁶



In a more recent installation, *Blood Pressure* (2001), Akakçe further elaborates the conflict of contemporary reality, exploring the metaphysical space of the individual in an increasingly fluid, artificially determined world. The sensorially intense, multimedia environment of the installation includes extensive wall painting, photographs, painted objects, wallpapered

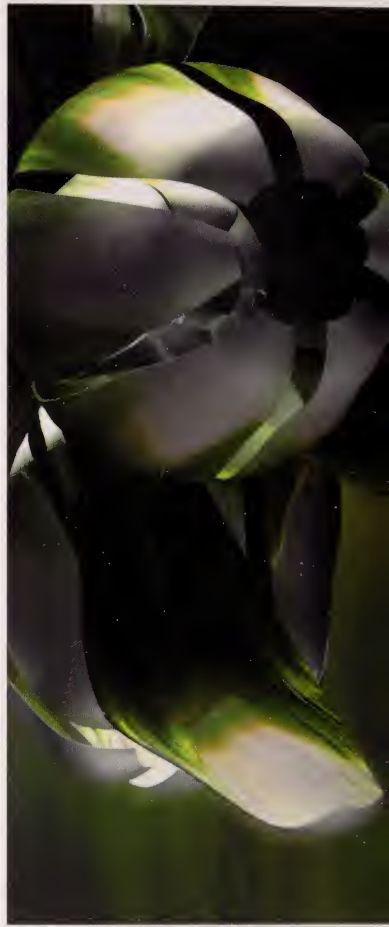
imagery, and digitally animated projection that reconstruct the existing architecture into a multiroom passage through an indeterminate, amorphous space. It has been observed that the growing accessibility of the digital dimension has altered our spatial

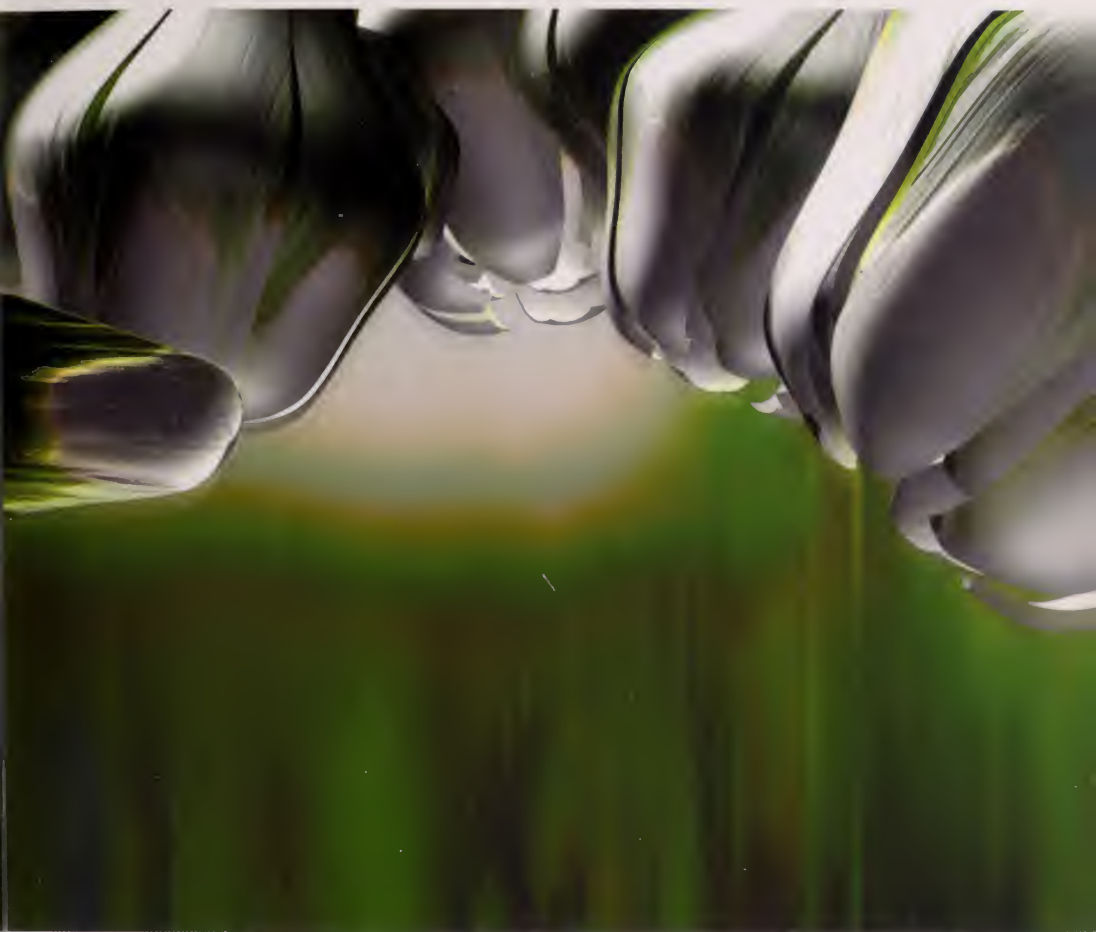
perception much as the invention of Renaissance perspective—in one critic’s words, “the first virtual reality”—did. Akakçe observes that “our interaction with objects and spaces has been palpably heightened in artificial ways,” an awareness central to his imagery.⁷ Though initially drawn by hand, the wall paintings, drawings, and projections in *Blood Pressure* capture the *idea* of the digital, as shapes and forms morph fluidly from representation to abstraction. Their graphic slickness glides easily into organic lines and forms that suggest a kind of protoplasmic space, a mechanistic ectoplasm.

Blood Pressure envelops the viewer in an arena of potential becoming, of endless process and development. The inhabitants of this world can never obtain the real but only exist in a state of liminality. Akakçe proposes a space of departure, echoed by the viewer’s directed movement through space that is without a conclusive point of arrival. The installation’s room-sized projection captures this lack of closure and the idea of infinite reinvention. In one sequence, an intricately rendered room houses two slowly spinning planes inscribed by enormous needles, like stylized turntables, futuristic sundials, or medical machinery tracing unknown vital signs. Their endless circularity is echoed in a live-action sequence in which a character is asked where she is headed. “I’m in transit,” she replies.

Akakçe’s imagery also parallels his idea of folding time, drawing as easily from the past as from an envisioned future. While undoubtedly absorbing historical aesthetics growing up in Ankara, Turkey—from the ubiquitous kilim patterns to the modular organics of Islamic and Ottoman art and architecture—Akakçe’s aesthetic was no less formed by his playing computer games, watching *Star Trek* on television, or observing a European ballet performed by his father’s company. The hybrid forms that emerge in his work draw on all of these influences in imagining what he calls the “future present,” proposing the organic/biological as the most compatible fusion with the technological—the first and most familiar complex system logically imagining the next.

Akakçe sees himself less a critic of these developments than an explorer, a historian projected into the future reflecting back on his living present. This fluid treatment of time is characteristic of his overall approach, and not unfamiliar. With astonishing rapidity, technological developments have engendered a different notion of time in contemporary society; while still definitively affixed to movement, the historical *conception* of the passage of time as strictly linear has begun to bend, to fold upon itself (not unlike the movement of forms in Akakçe’s projections). The ever increasing speed of the world we live in gives unprecedented centrality to the idea of time—from a simple idiom such as “wanting it done yesterday” to the possibility of subverting Time’s control over the human body with medical and technological inventions. The idea has been elegantly evoked in contemporary cultural theory by the grammatical tense—little used in English—of the “future anterior,” which expresses an action in the past that has yet to be completed in the future.⁸





Like much of Akakçe's work, *Blood Pressure* embodies the artist's idea that "the irreducible plurality of data we incessantly collect alters our format of being to a possibility of becoming."⁹ Humanity's main form of information and discovery is increasingly provided and mediated by technological means, less and less so by direct human interaction. For Akakçe, the loss of this immediacy may be more profound than most realize. Beyond the obvious desire for true human contact, he suggests that the loss of the intangible aspects of the physical perception of people, spaces, and objects may ultimately engender a loss of self and identity. Blinded to this loss by the simulacrum substituted for reality, we are unknowingly unmoored from self-awareness, drifting without direction and inhabiting potential rather than concrete being. Simultaneously, however, "the body's folding in on itself is accompanied by an unfolding of imaginary spaces,"¹⁰ which as suggested in *The Measure of All Things* holds the ambiguous possibility of a new type of future.

Meditating on the potential loss of a fixed point of time, space, and even identity, Akakçe's investigation of the relationship between the individual and the universe is the basis for the Whitney installation. On the wall before the entrance to the projection room, the viewer is presented with a framed drawing in which the image has been all but obliterated by a thick coating of black paint. The only visible surface contains the question: "Why are we so different from who we think we are?" Akakçe is concerned

not only with the nature of technology, of the individual, and of objects, but also with the idea of humanity's essence. He individualizes the notion of religion (perhaps better termed spirituality) as a personal exploration of self once the constructs of society and history are stripped away—a core of belief whose existence he doubts even while he searches for it. Elaborating on the moment of disappointed discovery suggested by the drawing's text, Akakçe finds that “in this strange romance of alienation...our ambiguous state of existence turns us into transient dreams in a permanent nightmare, like moving shadows on a great wall.”¹¹ Creating a space of reverie for the viewer, *Illusion of the First Time* is a comfort to the nightmare, a dream of newness and origins that is nonetheless conscious of failure.

Akakçe's optimism, like his work in general, can be seen as part of a “new modernist” approach that moves beyond the rigid heroics of modernism and the self-consciously cynical irony of postmodernism. Transcending the unresolved rift between the two, Akakçe builds toward a fusion of the utopian impulse with a contemporary investigation of the nature of reality, rationality, and technology.

“Seeing is the act of forgetting the name of the thing one sees.” —Paul Valéry

Modernism, as the philosophical underpinning of society since the sixteenth century, can be defined as the enlightenment: humanist rejection of tradition and authority in favor of reason and natural science. It is founded upon the assumption of an objective reality and belief in the autonomous individual who can know—and in fact is the sole source of—that reality.¹² Progress and novelty are valorized within a linear conception of history—a history of a “real” world that becomes increasingly objectified.

For modern art and architecture, this often translates to a focus on material reality to achieve the transcendent real, as immortalized in art critic Clement Greenberg's infamous theories of truth to medium, wherein painting's ultimate gesture was toward its own flatness. The romantic notion of the artist as heroic individual was concretized within these theories. The other critical strain of the modernist credo (seen particularly in architecture descended from the German Bauhaus influence) was the secular belief that machines, as products of reason and science rather than any god, would save the world. Machines themselves were beautiful because they were made only of what was necessary and reasonable.

Postmodernism, in turn, rejected these assumptions. While by nature against finite definitions, postmodernism may be characterized as a rejection of the sovereign, autonomous individual and an emphasis upon the anarchic, collective, anonymous experience. Postmodernism advocated collage, diversity, and most importantly, the dissolution of distinctions: the merging of subject and object, of self and other. Postmodern media artists accepted the impossibility of an original, unmediated vision of reality. Their subject matter is not reality itself, but the representation of reality by media and the world of media (including traditional art forms such as painting or photography)—the strategy of appropriation. However, the ever developing technologies that define our lives remained as much the illustration and source of postmodernism as were the comparable innovations of the modernist moment.

The idea of a new modernism in contemporary aesthetic theory is similarly linked to the advent of new media as artistic medium. Machines bring their own aesthetic; computers and virtual worlds both produce their own distinguishable style and inspire us to create one, as the modernists did for their machines of the future. The new modern artist might be defined as the new romantic painter, reintegrating the desire for the generative conception of the artist beyond the process of appropriation as an end. Using technology to create new confluences of form, the new modernist reinvents the language of modernist abstraction and design as a synthesis of man and machine, the play of the hand paired with the mathematically generated forms of the computer.

More than a nostalgic remaking of modernist imagery, Akakçe's work attempts the daunting task of the new generation: to integrate the two paradigms of the twentieth century. He seeks to merge a belief in science and rationality in the basic forms, idealism, and heroic spirit of modernism with the skepticism, complexity, deconstructive strategies, and baroque excess of postmodernism. By this strategy, Akakçe translates lived experience into hyper-painting—painting that deconstructs painting and simultaneously reanimates the modernist dream of direct, unmediated communication. Looking to cyberspace and the changes technology has wrought on our ideas of space and time, he acknowledges that the computer has created a different idea of artistic media. Its essence is twofold: a flatness that is the ultimate in modernist flatness, in which surface is indistinguishable from medium, but one that also denies it completely, functioning as a portal to other worlds without dimensionality. Instead of the computer as a media machine—one that simply presents imagery—this process can be seen, somewhat ironically, as a new interpretation of Greenbergian materialism, a return to the computer's essence as a fundamentally digital medium, with multiple modes of representation emerging from it.¹³

Akakçe's new modernism looks beyond the deconstructive impulse, reflecting a process that asserts if not the primacy, then at least the necessity of objects for thought. As our model of reality becomes less linear and increasingly multilayered, artists construct aesthetic worlds through their work to highlight the fluid border between the artificial and the real. The true object in *Illusion of the First Time* is the viewer's experience of it as space that is, as the artist states, "the borderline between reality and the world of dreams."¹⁴ The reinvigorated attention to form is a move away from discourse about the object to intercourse with it—a fusion of the mechanical and the organic that modernism rejected, where technology can be said to be embodied by the object, and by us. Enabled by the digital ideology of infinite universes, Akakçe fuses this notion with its oldest manifestation, its most personal and intimate form—the limitless potential of the worlds we imagine and dream.

—Shamim M. Momin

1. Artist statement, *Illusion of the First Time*, 2002.

2. The three works are titled compositions 1-2-3, intended by the artist to reference both of the common definitions of the word: the way an image is put together, as well as a musical work.

3. William Gibson, *Count Zero* (Ace Books: New York, 1986), 119.

4. Interview with the artist, September 9, 2002.

5. "Haluk Akakçe," *Style* 54 (October 2002), 68–74.

6. Gibson, 114.

7. Max Henry, "When Painting Meets Digital," *Tema Celeste* 85 (2001), 57.

8. Certainly, fear of death and the desire for immortality are central concepts of the history of humanity. However, one could argue a fundamental shift is occurring to a world in which science fiction's notion of creating a personality "construct"—wherein one's soul, one's essence, might inhabit the nonspace of the computer and thus live forever—seems within the realm of possibility.

9. Artist statement, *Blood Pressure*, 2001.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Interview with the artist, September 9, 2002.

12. The Cartesian cogito—I think, therefore I am—is the essence of this idea.

13. This change, or rupture, can be understood as the transition from analog to digital—literally and conceptually. The digital image is a uniform, gridded subdivision of pixels, each individually determined by a set of instructions stored as binary code rather than as part of a larger image. The translation into numerical code makes imaging essentially indistinguishable from other media in advance of the translation to a physical state—multimedia becomes not a wealth of different media, but a multiplicity of corresponding media implicit in the use of a computer. The essence is that array of points, stored as data and interpreted by various devices. In other words, there is no fundamental media to digital code but itself, and no fundamental linkage between one set of pixel instructions (an independent grouping of numbers) and the next—each image becomes merely one among many possible representational forms.

14. Artist statement, *Illusion of the First Time*, 2002.



Haluk Akakçe

Bilkent University, Ankara (BFA, 1993)
 Royal College of Art, London (MA, 1996)
 School of the Art Institute of Chicago,
 (MFA, 1997)
 Lives and works in New York City

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

- 2002** *Un Equilibre Delizato*, Centro Nazionale per le Arti Contemporanee, Rome
Still Life, Bernier/Eliades Gallery, Athens, Greece
 Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, Scotland
- 2001** *Blood Pressure*, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva
Blood Pressure, Deitch Projects, New York
The Measure of All Things, Kunst-Werke, Berlin
No Way Forward No Way Back, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut
- 2000** Henry Urbach Architecture, New York
Special Projects Program, Winter 2000, P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center/The Museum of Modern Art, Long Island City, New York

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2002** *Fair*, Royal College of Art, London
media-city Seoul 2002, Seoul Museum of Art, Korea
Metropolitan Iconographies, XXV Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil
Out of Site, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
Thin Skin: The Fickle Nature of Bubbles, Spheres, and Inflatable Structures, AXA Gallery, New York
- 2001** *Animations*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center/The Museum of Modern Art, Long Island City, New York
Casino 2001, Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Ghent, Belgium
Neue Welt, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt
Painting at the Edge of the World, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Teil von...?, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna
Without Hesitation, Die Sammlung Olbricht Teil 2, Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst and Neues Museum Weserburg, Bremen, Germany
- 2000** *DNAid Billboards*, Creative Time, New York
Dusk, I-20 Gallery, New York
Strange Paradises, Casino Luxembourg-Forum d'Art Contemporain, Luxembourg
- 1999** *The Passion and The Wave*, Sixth International Istanbul Biennial, Dolmabahçe Cultural Center
- 1998** *Selections*, The Drawing Center, New York



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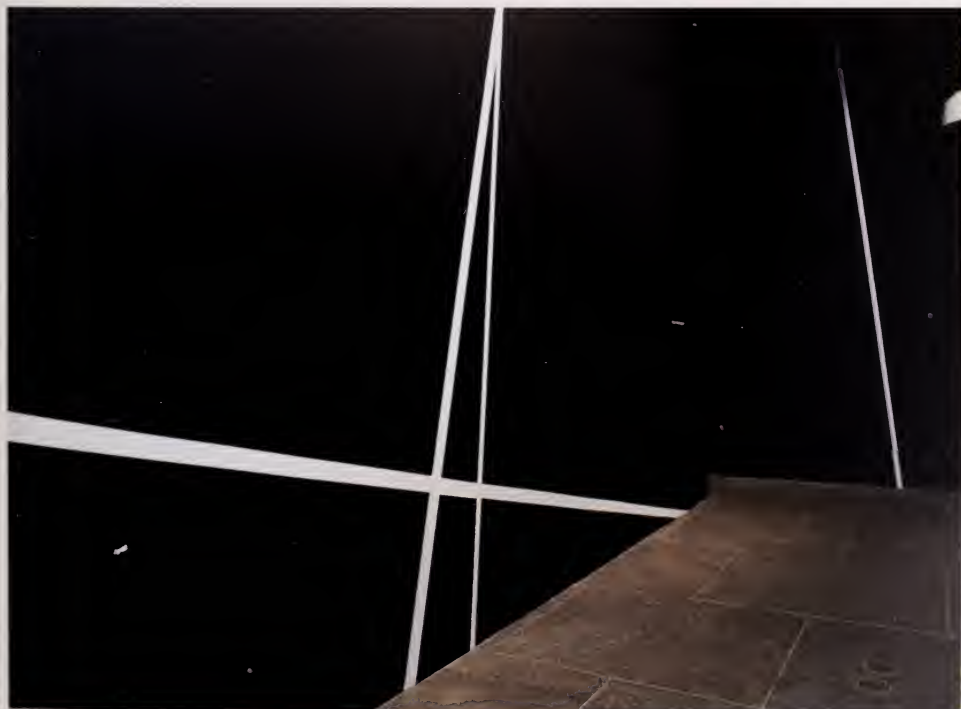
I would like to thank Shamim Momin for her belief in and support of my work, for inviting me to do this project at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, and for our conversations that made the process of making the piece a precious experience; Howie Chen and Austin Yang for their patience and hard work; and Holly Davey and the Whitney team for their creative thinking in installing the show.

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WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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Sunday 11 am–7 pm

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition
Haluk Akakçe: Illusion of the First Time,
organized by Shamim M. Momin, branch
director and curator, Whitney Museum
of American Art at Philip Morris.



COVER AND PAGES 3, 6–7, and 11 (TOP): Stills from
Illusion of the First Time, 2002. Collection of the artist;
courtesy Deitch Projects, New York

PAGES 10 and 11 (BOTTOM): *Illusion of the First Time*, 2002
(installation views). Wall mural with latex paint and
framed text. Collection of the artist; courtesy Deitch
Projects, New York. Photographs by George Hirose